CLASSIC POP PRESENTS

QUEEN

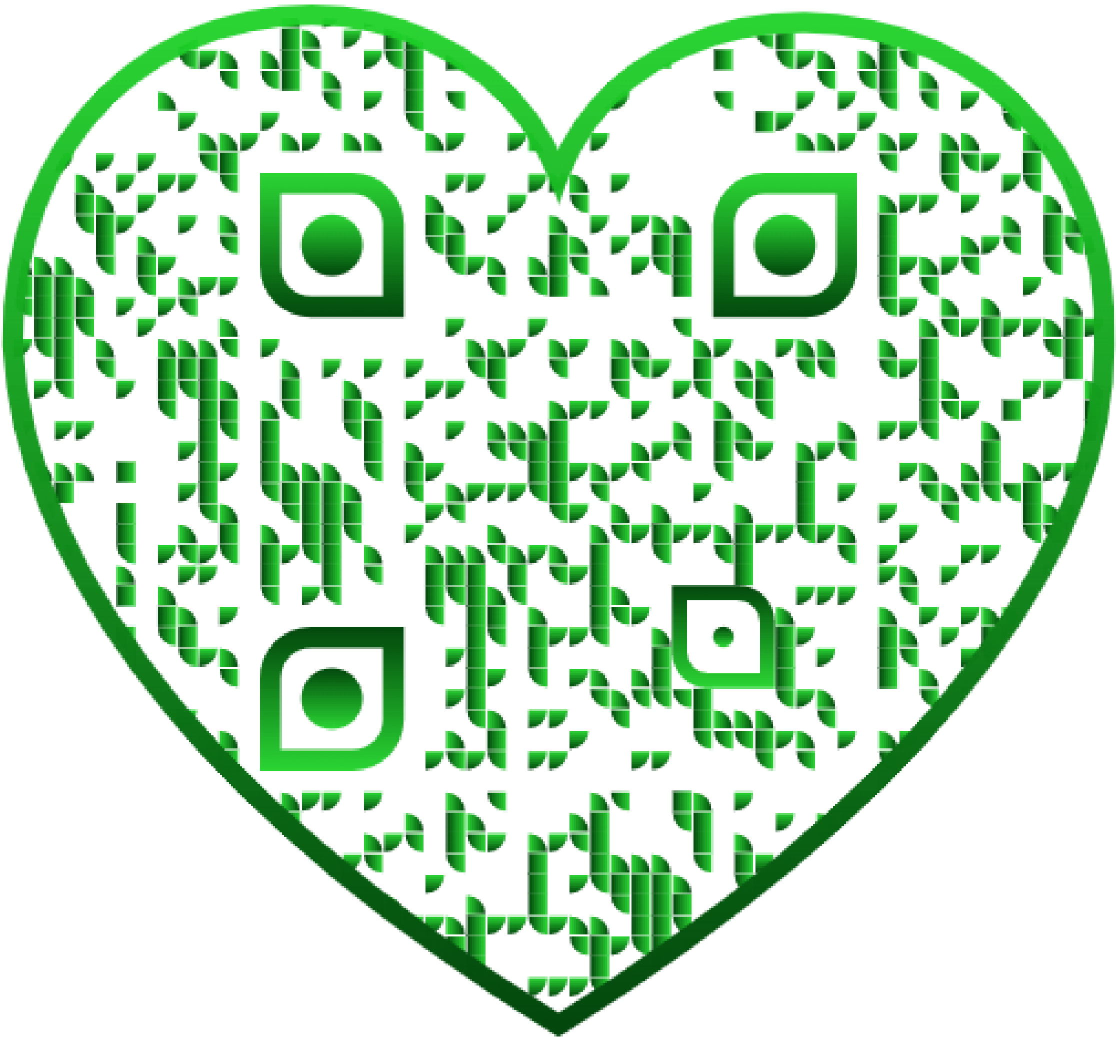
ANNIVERSARY EDITION

50 YEARS OF BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY

THUNDERBOLTS & LIGHTNING

THE MAKING OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST SINGLE

PLUS! The band • The recording • The video • The legacy
A Night At The Opera + much more!



The name Queen was suggested by Freddie Mercury, who felt it captured the band's flamboyant and regal style

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WELCOME

If ever there was evidence that taking big risks results in even bigger rewards, *Bohemian Rhapsody* is surely the greatest example in music history. Queen's record label, their radio pluggers, their musical peers, the music press and, well, pretty much everyone who first heard the song, thought they'd gone stark raving bonkers. A near six-minute single incorporating piano balladry, rock guitar and multi-layered operatic harmonies? Thunderbolts and lightning? Doing the Fandango? Beelzebub? It was a wildly ostentatious and massively audacious move, but Freddie and co. stuck steadfast to their guns and it most certainly paid off. Despite writing numerous other classics across their hugely successful career, *Bohemian Rhapsody* is the one song that Queen will be remembered for, and one that will remain in the rock songbook in perpetuity.

But since when was music about playing it safe? "It was either gonna be massive or it was gonna be nothing," Roger Taylor told *RockPortraits* of the lead single to Queen's fourth album *A Night At The Opera*.

Half a century on from its release on the last day of October 1975, *Bohemian Rhapsody* remains a benchmark in rock music as the ultimate game-changing single, but it also raises a much-needed smile in our lives whenever we need it, be it via shower karaoke or headbanging along in the car.

That they actually managed to fit the thing onto a seven-inch single is an accomplishment in itself. That it went on to give Queen their first UK No.1, and eventually become the most-streamed song of the 20th century, beggars belief. Yet the band's histrionic mini-symphony bottled up everything that they were about: deeply moving, unashamedly flamboyant and hugely entertaining – yet utterly overblown – rock'n'roll.

Much like Freddie Mercury's vision for the band, starting with its bold new name Queen and embedded within his own self-created rock persona, *Bohemian Rhapsody* was reality and fantasy side-by-side in glorious balance. The song rightfully won an Ivor Novello for Freddie and Queen a place in rock history, their defining anthem.

The world would be a far duller place without *Bohemian Rhapsody* in it, and we could all learn a thing or two from Queen. If you only live once, then to hell with it, take that risk!

Rik

Rik Flynn, Editor

Queen are one of the world's most commercially successful bands, and *Bohemian Rhapsody* remains their best-selling single

© Getty

THE KINGS

OF QUEEN

QUEEN WAS A BAND FAR GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS, AND WHEN FREDDIE MERCURY, BRIAN MAY, ROGER TAYLOR AND JOHN DEACON CAME TOGETHER AT THE DAWN OF THE 70s, MAGIC ENSUED. YET EACH MEMBER PLAYED THEIR OWN UNIQUE ROLE.

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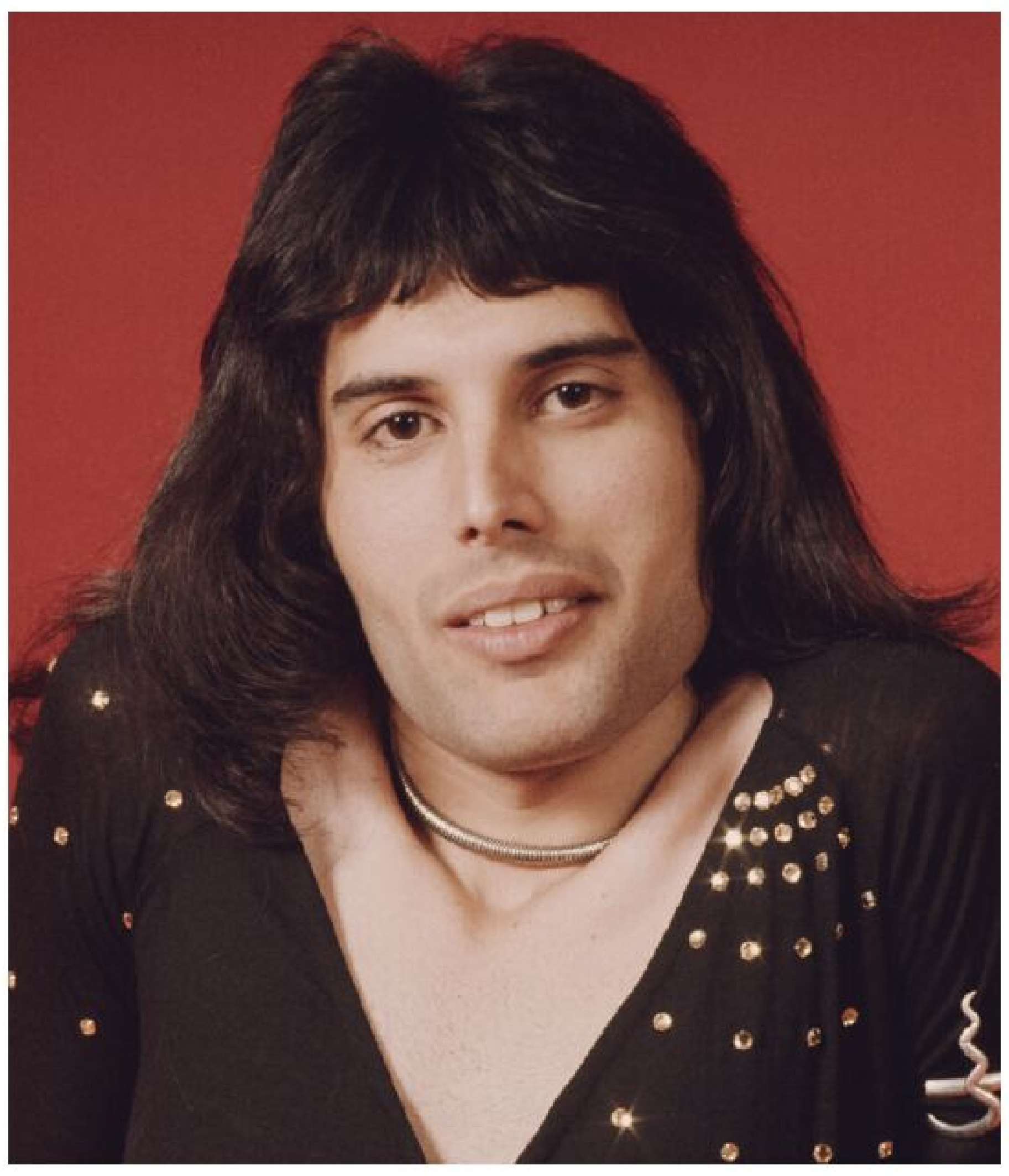
The great Freddie Mercury in all his 70s pomp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FREDDIE MERCURY

At the height of his fame Freddie Mercury declared to an interviewer: "The most important thing, darling, is to live a fabulous life. As long as it's fabulous, I don't care how long it is." The man who was born Farrokh Bulsara in 1946, renamed himself Freddie Mercury and fronted one of the greatest bands in music history, only made it to age 45, but his light burned fabulously bright.

His motto was "The bigger, the better, in everything" and that's how he lived, in public at least – wielding a mic stand like a weapon, preferring to tease his sexuality for much of his life whilst prancing around like a Tom Of Finland macho man as an act of hiding in plain sight. He was always flamboyantly front and centre in Queen videos, saluted by none other than Nirvana frontman Kurt Cobain, who wrote in his suicide note that he envied how Mercury seemed to "relish in the love and adoration from the crowd".

Farrokh gave himself the nickname Freddie at boarding school in India, after spending his early years in Zanzibar, where his Indian parents had moved because of work. He was a piano prodigy from age seven and five years later he started a school band called The Hectics, flexing his considerable vocal chops around rock'n'roll covers by the likes of Cliff Richard and Little Richard.

Due to political unrest in Zanzibar, in 1964 Freddie and his family fled to Feltham in Middlesex. He then studied art at Isleworth Polytechnic in West London and graphic art and design at Ealing Art College, graduating in 1969 and performing in a bunch of local bands whilst flogging clothes at Kensington Market and working as a baggage handler at Heathrow.

Freddie also spent some time in Liverpool after joining a band named Ibex who then became Wreckage, playing Jimi Hendrix-inspired blues. The band went nowhere, as did Oxford-based Sour Milk Sea, but then 1970 his fortunes changed when he met Brian May and Roger Taylor and joined their band Smile.

He also changed his name, adopting Mercury as his moniker for reasons that are not 100% clear. According to May it was because of

HIS MOTTO WAS "THE BIGGER, THE BETTER, IN EVERYTHING" AND THAT'S HOW HE LIVED HIS LIFE, IN PUBLIC AT LEAST – WIELDING A MIC STAND LIKE A WEAPON, PREFERRING TO TEASE HIS SEXUALITY FOR MUCH OF HIS LIFE

Freddie, pictured here in 1977, was posthumously inducted into the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame in 2001

a lyric that Freddie had written which went "Oh Mother Mercury, what have you done to me?" But Queen fan club secretary Jim Jenkins offered a different explanation to Lesley-Ann Jones: "Freddie told me himself in 1975 that it's after the messenger of the gods" as in the Roman god Mercury.

Such showboating was typical of a performer who was loud and proud in the public eye, rightly saying, "I think I'm totally original", yet shy and quiet away from the spotlight, admitting, "Inside I'm a completely different man".

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Hailed as a trailblazer for the queer community, he had a long-term relationship with Mary Austin and called her his common-law wife; he then remained friends with her as he started a relationship with Jim Hutton, whom he called his husband and who nursed Mercury after he became ill with HIV.

Freddie died on 24 November 1991, from bronchial pneumonia, just a day after telling the world he was HIV positive. Rockstar immortality was a given, whilst Mercury had already decided where his soul was headed. "I don't want to go to Heaven," he once stated. "Hell is much better. Think of all the interesting people you're going to meet down there!"

Freddie Mercury, mic stand in hand, live on stage in 1975

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Animal welfare activist, astrophysicist and rock god Sir Brian May in 1978

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BRIAN MAY

Brian Harold May was born in 1947 in Hampton Hill, Middlesex, and showed a flair for the guitar from an early age. One of his fondest memories is of waking up on his ninth birthday to find an acoustic guitar at the end of his bed that his parents had saved up to buy him.

A trained pianist, May was a teen when he formed his first band at Hampton Grammar School. They were called 1984 after the George Orwell dystoptian novel, an early indication that here was a budding rockstar with intelligent and grandiose tastes. He was also an enterprising young man, building his own electric guitar with the help of his father.

The man who would eventually go on to add 'astrophysicist' and 'animal welfare activist' to his CV recalled in a chat with *The Big Issue*: "I was very passionate about making music. I was entranced by the universe and wanted to explore it. And I had a strong feeling about animals. A feeling that things weren't right in terms of the way we treat the other creatures on this planet."

That feeling grew until later in life he found a way to do something about it, leading him to speak out against fox hunting and badger culling as well as donating signed guitars and artwork to animal rights charities.

This guitar hero's influences included Cliff Richard and The Shadows, along with The Beatles, The Who, Led Zeppelin and Jimi Hendrix. Then there was Irish musician Rory Gallagher, for whom he reserved the highest praise. "He was a magician," he told *Hollywood.com*. "He was one of the very few people of that time who could make his guitar do anything, it seemed. It was Rory that gave me my sound and that's the sound I still have."

Hampton Grammar was an all-boys school, which Brian has said was "a terrible idea" because separating boys and girls scarred them for life and left them "lacking in the skills they need to make contact with the opposite sex". It did, however, fuel his desire to become a rock musician after he attended a dance where a local rock band was playing. "Some boys were asking girls to dance," he told *The Big Issue*, "but I didn't know where to start and I was far too shy to consider it. I thought to myself, 'If I was on stage I wouldn't have to worry about any of this. I would just be away up there, being fabulous, and maybe girls would come to me.'"

As Smile became Queen, he got the glory and the girls – including his first wife Christine Mullen, with whom he has three children, and *EastEnders* star Anita Dobson, whom he met in 1986 and finally married in 2000.

May has amassed a huge collection of guitars. The former student of physics and mathematics at Imperial College London had to put his studies on hold because of the band but eventually graduated in 2007. Astrophysics remain a passion for the man who became Sir Brian May in 2023, although he remains humble – saying he's shocked when people are excited about meeting him. As for that guitar his parents gifted him when he was nine, he still has it.

HIS FIRST BAND WERE CALLED 1984 AFTER THE GEORGE ORWELL DYSTOPIAN NOVEL, AN EARLY INDICATION THAT HERE WAS A A BUDDING ROCKSTAR WITH INTELLIGENT AND GRANDIOSE TASTES

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Roger Taylor is generally recognised as one of rock's greatest drummers

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ROGER TAYLOR

It must have been a sign. The boy who was destined to be Queen's drummer was born in the same maternity ward at West Norfolk and Lynn Hospital in King's Lynn that future Queen of England Elizabeth II opened in the late 40s. She met Brian's mother Winifred shortly before Roger Meddows Taylor came into the world in July 1949.

The family later moved to Truro in Cornwall, where seven-year-old Roger played the ukulele in a band called the Bubblingover Boys. He doesn't exactly remember when he was drawn to the drums but thinks it was when he was around nine or ten.

"I remember banging on my mother's saucepans with her knitting needles," Roger recalled in *Modern Drummer*. "Then my father [who worked in the car industry] found an ancient snare drum in a storage bin where he worked. It was an old brass and wood thing. I started with that. Then I got a real snare drum and then a cymbal. You just didn't get a drum kit in those days [and] I wouldn't have known what to do with a whole kit even if I had one."

Taylor's dad refashioned an old Ajax drum kit for him and the set was finally complete a couple of years later when Roger added a hi-hat. He'd found his calling. "Drums were something I naturally felt kind of good at. I found it very easy to pick up and play things like *Wipe Out*."

Like many aspiring drummers of that and subsequent eras, he was a fan of The Jimi Hendrix Experience's Mitch Mitchell and his jazz stylings, as well as Led Zeppelin's John Bonham. Of the latter Taylor told the BBC World Service: "He was the best rock drummer who ever lived. He had the best drum sound and he was the fastest player."

The Who's Keith Moon was up there in his estimation as "absolutely brilliant". Roger was less enamoured of Johnny Quale and The Reactions, the band he was in at Truro School. "We were terrible," he believes. Other bands followed. "And I was always the leader of those bands, for some reason. I must have been a pushy one."

He dabbled in dentistry, studying it at London Hospital Medical College, but it bored him so he switched to biology at East London Polytechnic, obtaining a BSc in the process. Then he joined Smile, who became Queen and... well, you can read all about that elsewhere in this publication.

Roger is the father of five kids, including Rufus Taylor – aka the drummer with The Darkness. It was Freddie who came up with Rufus' middle name of Tiger but the youngster got his love of drumming from his dad. Roger bought Rufus his first drum kit when he was 12, after which Taylor Jr said: "Dad, this is what I want to do for the rest of my life."

As well as his work in Queen and his solo output, Roger was in the side-project band The Cross from 1987 to 1993 as lead vocalist and rhythm guitarist. In various capacities, he's also worked with such varied artists as Eric Clapton, Elton John, Shakin' Stevens, Foo Fighters and Jimmy Nail, to name just a few. And he was appointed an OBE for services to music in the 2020 New Year Honours list.

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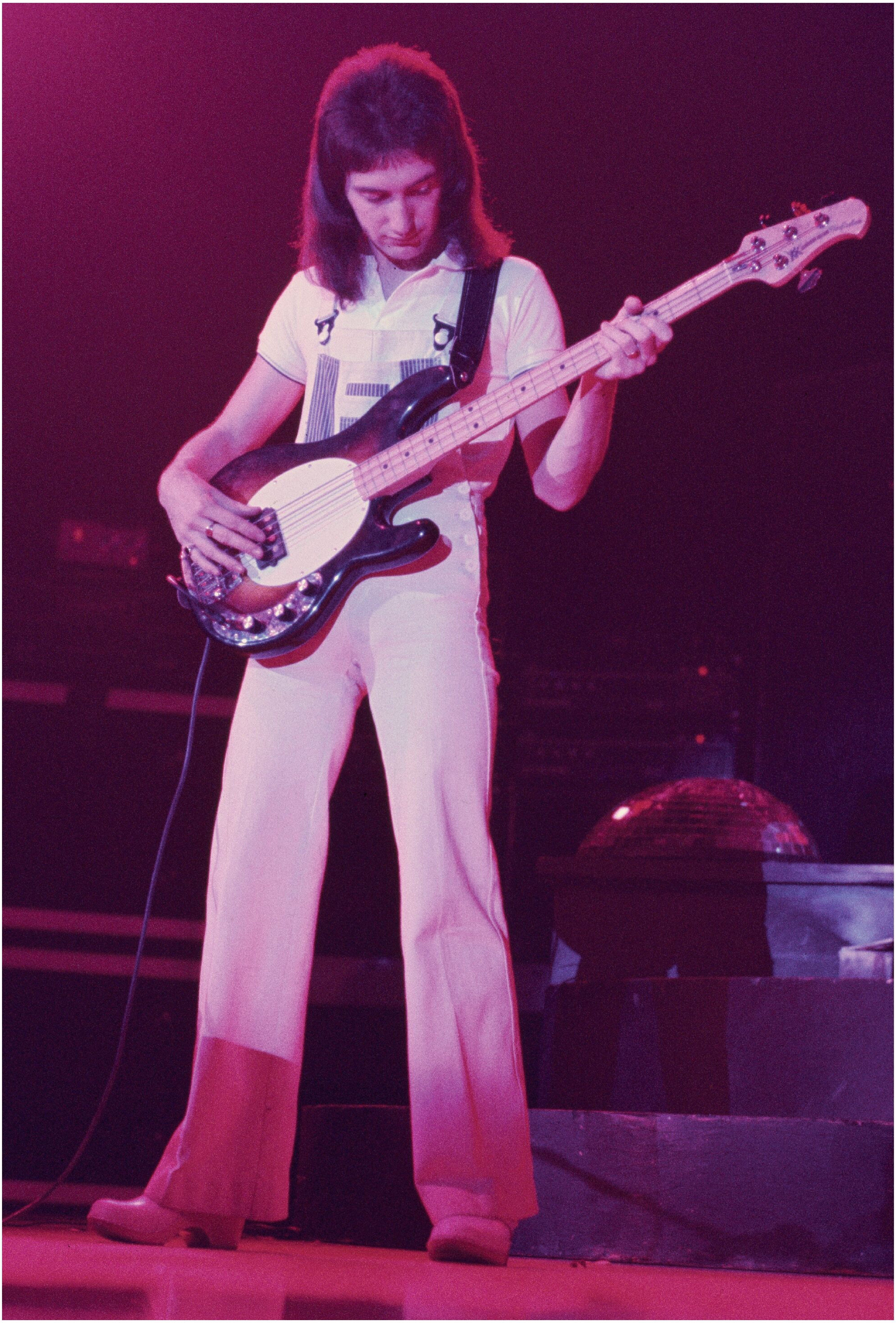

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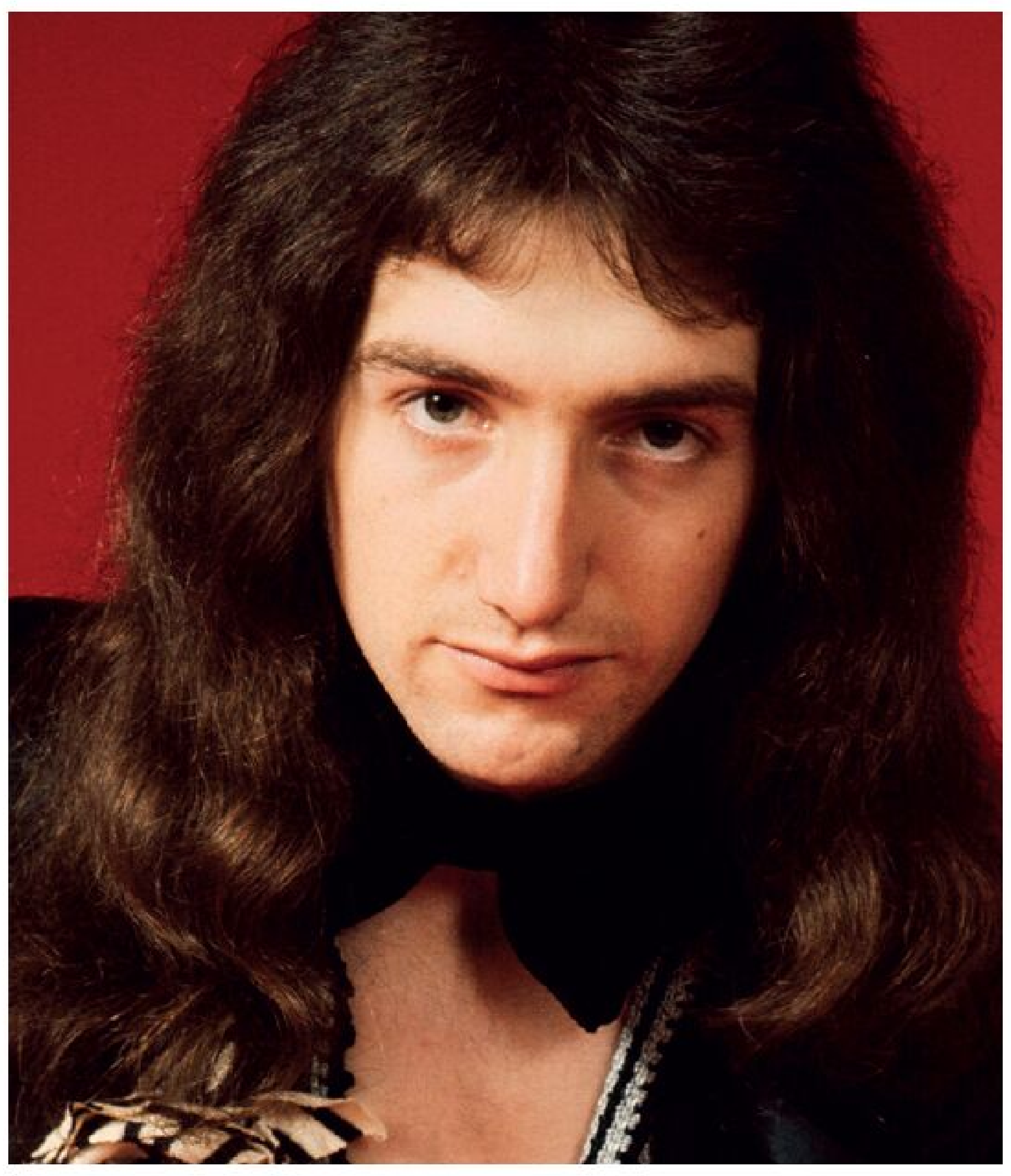
◂ **John Deacon retired from the music business in 1997 but remains involved in Queen's business affairs**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JOHN DEACON

Mercury may have been the shy, quiet one when he wasn't stalking the stage or singing his heart out in the studio, but John Deacon was reserved and reticent even when the spotlight was shone straight at the band.

Born in 1951, the Leicester lad got into electronics at a young age, just as his dad had. One of his early projects was tinkering with an old reel-to-reel tape recorder so he could use it to record songs from the radio, mainly by The Beatles.

"There was always a lot of American music in England," he told radio interviewer Jim Ladd of his early influences, "until obviously when The Beatles came around. Then there was a shift towards English music, but before then American music was the main thing."

English artists who influenced his bass playing included John Entwistle from The Who and Chris Squire from Yes, then later he was inspired in his songwriting by US artists like Chic, Michael Jackson and Stevie Wonder, having been a fan of soul music from the get-go.

He thought of electronics as a possible career choice, but after buying the Fab Four's first two albums he was also drawn towards music. His folks had bought him a plastic guitar when he was seven but he squirrelled away money from his paper round until he had enough to buy a 'proper' guitar, which he practised at home and during jam sessions in a mate's garage.

John's family moved to nearby Oadby, where he was affectionately known as either Deacs or Deacy. A bright pupil, he left grammar school with eight O-levels and three A-levels. Amidst all that studying, he also found time to form a school band called The Opposition when he was 14, switching to the bass when the original bassist left. John splashed out £22 on his first bass guitar as the band became The New Opposition. After they'd gone through more line-up and name changes, Deacon quit in 1969 as he headed to the capital to study electronics at the University of London's Chelsea College, where he gained a First Class Honours Degree. He had his bass with him, just in case.

The next year he saw a live performance by a new band called Queen, of whom he recalled to *Queenonline*: "They were all dressed in black and the lights were very dim too, so all I could see were four shadowy figures. They didn't make a lasting impression on me at the time."

Little did Deacon know they were about to play a huge part in his future. By early 1971 he'd met Brian and Roger, who'd gone through bass players like hotcakes and asked him to audition. He took along his bass guitar and custom-adapted amplifier (subsequently christened the legendary Deacy Amp), remembering: "I went along and basically learned a few of the songs they were doing at the time, which were quite a few of the songs we ended up doing on our first album."

Deacon left Queen in 1997 and retired from the public eye. Apparently he still has a 'yes' or 'no' say in Brian and Roger's ongoing activities with the band, with May telling *Mojo* recently: "We get messages that he's happy with what we're doing, but he doesn't want the stress of being involved creatively and we respect that." ■

DEVASTATED BY MERCURY'S DEATH, JOHN DEACON LEFT QUEEN IN 1997 AND RETIRED FROM THE PUBLIC EYE. APPARENTLY HE STILL HAS A 'YES' OR 'NO' SAY IN BRIAN AND ROGER'S ONGOING ACTIVITIES WITH THE BAND.

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BOHEMIAN MEMORIES

> I always wanted to do something operatic. I wanted something with a mood setter at the start, going into a rock type of thing which completely breaks off into an opera section, a vicious twist and then returns to the theme. I don't really know anything about opera myself. Just certain pieces. I wanted to create what I thought Queen could do. It's not authentic, certainly not. It was as far as my limited capacity could take me. I'm going to shatter some illusions, it was just one of those pieces I wrote for the album: just writing my batch of songs. In its early stages I almost rejected it, but then it grew.

FREDDIE MERCURY (ROLLING STONE)

© Getty

1973-era Queen, the year the public first heard of this thrilling new band

QUEEN ASCEND TO THE THRONE

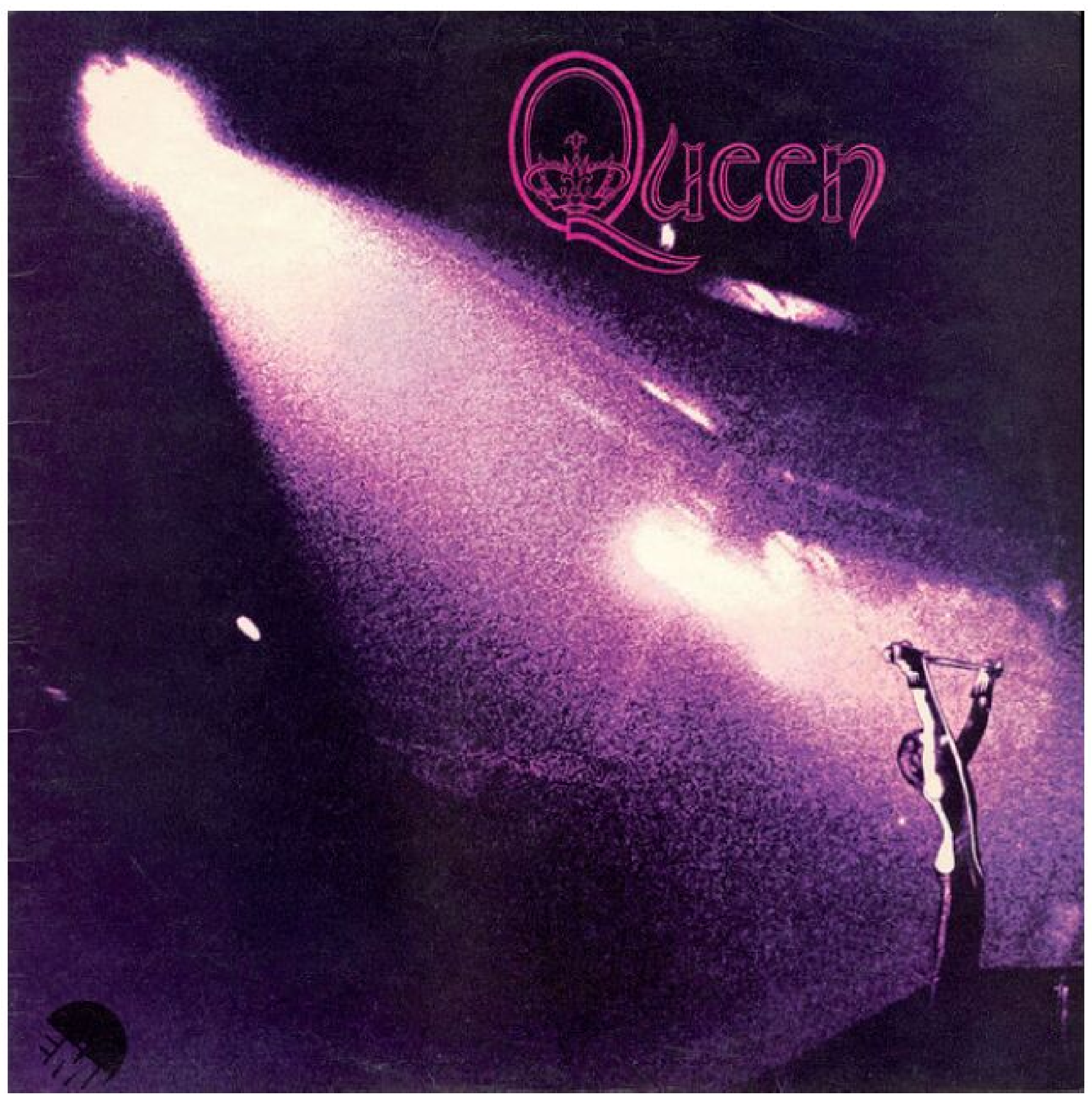
FROM THE START AND THROUGH THEIR EARLY YEARS, THE FOURPIECE ENDURED ABUSE FROM ALL QUARTERS. THEIR BOUNDARY-PUSHING SECOND ALBUM *QUEEN II* WOULD CHANGE EVERYTHING…

The name was Freddie Mercury's idea. It had come to him a few years earlier, then in 1970 he suggested Queen as a moniker to his reticent bandmates, declaiming: "It's wonderful, dear [he said 'dear' a lot], people will love it." Later the flamboyant frontman told *Rolling Stone*: "It's very regal obviously and it sounds splendid. It's a strong name, very universal and immediate. It had a lot of visual potential and was open to all sorts of interpretations." The shy-behind-the-scenes singer usually preferred to remain playful about his sexuality but told *Melody Maker*: "I was certainly aware of the gay connotations, but that was just one facet of it."

It all started with a smile in the late 60s Well, Smile with a capital S to be exact. That's the name guitarist Brian May, vocalist Tim Staffell and keyboardist Chris Smith gave themselves when they started a hardrock band, then recruited drummer Roger Taylor. After Staffell quit, Freddie – who had been running a stall in Kensington Market with Taylor – came on board as the singer, changing Smile to Queen because "the whole point was to be pompous and provocative" and eventually switching his surname from Bulsara to Mercury.

Freddie's recruitment was a turning point for May, who recalled in *The Big Issue*: "He was so convinced that he would be successful, he never doubted it. We were all precocious boys but he was another level. But we all shared this passion, and the energy grew and coalesced into something very powerful."

Taylor, on the other hand, felt of the young Freddie: "He wasn't such a good singer back then. He was so extreme, one was tempted to laugh at first, because he hadn't developed his voice." Speaking to the *Daily Telegraph*, Taylor added: "He didn't have the control he had later, but he had this thrusting energy and zeal for everything. And we were big pals. We had a stall in Kensington Market and he was so delightful, just great to be around, with a tremendous lust for life."



Queen's long-playing debut would hit No.24 in the United Kingdom and No.83 in America

Queen played their first live show in Truro in 1970, followed by their London debut at which they performed self-composed songs along with rock'n'roll tracks by the likes of Cliff Richard And The Shadows when Cliff was still a credible up-and-comer, not a squeaky-clean, housewives' choice popstar with a mission to dominate Christmas.

AFTER A BIT OF SELF-PROMOTION, THE ALBUM GOT THEM SIGNED TO EMI AND REACHED NO.24 – EVEN THOUGH LEAD SINGLE *KEEP YOURSELF ALIVE*, NOW CONSIDERED QUINTESSENTIAL EARLY QUEEN, FLOPPED

Bassists Mike Grose and Barry Mitchell had come and gone by the time John Deacon came on board in February 1971 to complete the classic Queen line-up. They continued to gig around the capital until late '71 when they got to cut a demo at the new De Lane Lea Studios as a test of the facility's acoustics. One of the tracks, *Keep Yourself Alive*, caught the attention of visiting producers John Anthony and Roy Thomas Baker, who touted Queen's name around record companies, as did promoter and friend of the band Ken Testi.

The band said no to a low-ball offer from Charisma Records, then secured a management deal with the Neptune Productions subsidiary of Trident Studios, allowing them to cut their self-titled debut album at Trident during the evening "off-hours". With Anthony and Baker at the helm, they re-recorded demos and laid down new tracks with what the latter called "kitchen-sink overproduction" on a rock-and-ready prog rock album. After a bit of self-promotion, the album got them signed to EMI Records and reached No.24 on the UK charts – even though lead single *Keep Yourself Alive*, now considered quintessential early Queen, flopped.

After establishing themselves as a great live band who'd held their own supporting Mott The Hoople on tour, they put that to rights with a No.10 placing for *Seven Seas Of Rhye* from aptly-named second

© Getty

album *Queen II*. They'd begun writing and recording it in summer 1973 as an even rockier set of songs across a "White" side group effort and a "Black" side that only Freddie had a hand in composing.

Released in March 1974, the album's cover pose was inspired by screen queen Marlene Dietrich. This time they'd been able to record it during regular studio hours, although David Bowie declined to produce it because he was busy with his own music. So Roy Thomas Baker was brought back in alongside Robin Geoffrey Cable. Influences included Led Zeppelin and The Who because they were among the band's favourites at the time. But Queen were developing their own sound, with May quoted in the book *Queen: The Early Years* as saying: "We were trying to push studio techniques to a new limit for rock groups. It was fulfilling all our dreams, because we didn't have much opportunity for that on the first album."

***Queen II* was released on 8 March 1974 by EMI Records in the UK and Elektra Records in the US**

They'd ended the previous year on a high, playing to 7,000 people over two triumphant nights at the Hammersmith Odeon on the Mott The Hoople tour. But in January 1974 things had taken a bit of a nosedive after they turned up late for a festival in Australia and were booed by an audience who were there to see homegrown acts, not a bunch of category-defying long-haired hippies from England.

It would take time and management and deal changes to turn around their personal fortunes (Taylor was still living in a bedsit and newly-married Deacon had to borrow money to put down a deposit on a house), but *Seven Seas Of Rhye* turned things around for them professionally. In February 1974 Bowie had to pull out of performing *Rebel Rebel* on *Top Of The Pops* and Queen went on in his place, lip-syncing to *Seven Seas Of Rhye* and securing the first in a long line of smash hits.

The album went to No.5 over here, even if given such excesses as the six-minute, chorus-free *The March Of The Black Queen*, *Queen II* wasn't to everyone's tastes. The Canadian music press called it "an over-produced monstrosity" but Roger remains proud of it, telling *Classic Rock*: "*Queen II* was more of-a-piece rather than just being songs thrown onto an album, which is what the first one was. We were really starting to push the boundaries of the studio in terms of overdubbing and what we could do vocally."

That April they were back on the road with Mott The Hoople for a US tour, but they had to drop out after May collapsed from hepatitis. He was out of action until halfway through the recording sessions for third LP *Sheer Heart Attack*, which expanded their musical repertoire to include ragtime, music hall and Caribbean flavours. Brian was laid low again with a stomach ulcer but he still contributed four self-penned songs to the record, including opener *Brighton Rock* with its scorching guitar solo and second single *Now I'm Here*. The killer track, though, was Mercury's *Killer Queen*, which soared to No.2 in the UK and gave the band their first Stateside hit, reaching No.12 on the Billboard chart. Dropping on 8 November, just eight months after *Queen II*, the album itself was more linear and focused and it was a bigger seller, peaking at No.2 in Queen's homeland and matching the single with a No.12 placing in the US.

QUEEN
SHEER HEART ATTACK
1974's *Sheer Heart Attack* was Queen's third album and would peak at No.2 in the UK

THE ALBUM WENT TO NO.5 OVER HERE, EVEN IF GIVEN SUCH EXCESSES AS THE SIX-MINUTE, CHORUS-FREE *THE MARCH OF THE BLACK QUEEN*, *QUEEN II* WASN'T TO EVERYONE'S TASTES

They were now able to tour the world as headliners and the days of Freddie being heckled with "Fucking get off, ya c**t", as once happened in Birmingham, were long gone. As May told *Classic Rock*: "We were just totally ignored for so long and then completely slagged off by everyone in the early days. There was no kind of abuse that wasn't thrown at us. It was only around the time of *Sheer Heart Attack* that it began to change."

Assistant mix engineer Gary Langan agreed. "That was the album that showed the world what they were capable of," he said in the same *Classic Rock* feature. "If that album hadn't been as successful as it was, then something like *A Night At The Opera* probably wouldn't have been accepted." ■

Performing the No.2-charting *Killer Queen* on *Top Of The Pops* in 1974

BOHEMIAN MEMORIES

“I think it has a deep authenticity on so many levels. It’s not something trying to be clever, it’s not something which was assembled from non-intersecting places; it was one concept, even though it’s very complex, it was very much in Freddie’s head at the time, telling a story, and it had the benefit of us as a production or collaboration at our peak.”

BRIAN MAY (LIBRARY OF CONGRESS)

“The only band with whom I’d worked was Queen; I didn’t know about how other bands recorded. So spending weeks doing guitar solos with Brian and even more weeks doing vocals seemed like the norm to me. My job was really to learn and look after the band. To be ‘seen but not heard’ was the task in those days, but I became really good friends with all of them.”

GARY LANGAN, ASSISTANT MIX ENGINEER (SOUND ON SOUND)

© Getty

Freddie Mercury famously referred to *Bohemian Rhapsody* as a "mock opera"

ANY WAY THE WIND BLOWS

THE GENESIS OF A MASTERPIECE

AT ALMOST SIX MINUTES LONG, *BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY* COMBINED BALLADRY, OPERA AND THE ULTIMATE GUITAR RIFF TO BECOME ONE OF THE BAND'S MOST CELEBRATED – AND AUDACIOUS – CREATIONS

The lead 45 from Queen's fourth album *A Night At The Opera* would go on to become their signature song, one of the UK's biggest-selling singles and five minutes and 55 seconds of fuel for millions of bad karaoke renditions. It was like nothing the band had ever done before and no one has pulled off since – an "operatic thing", as Freddie Mercury modestly called it, with multi-track harmonies, bonkers lyrics and a guitar riff for the ages.

And it was, like the name Queen itself, Freddie's masterstroke. He'd been noodling around with bits of the song since the late 60s, specifically the "Mama, just killed a man…" lyric and the opening ballad section on something he was calling *The Cowboy Song*.

WHEN IT CAME TIME FOR QUEEN TO START WORK ON *A NIGHT AT THE OPERA*, THE REST OF THE BAND THOUGHT *BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY* WAS AN "INTRIGUING AND ORIGINAL AND WORTHY OF WORK"

A few years later Mercury played it at his flat for producer Roy Thomas Baker. Sat at the piano, he played the first part and told Baker, "This is the chord sequence." Freddie then played more of the ballad bit, took his fingers off the keys and announced, "This is where the opera section comes in." The producer's reaction: "We both just burst out laughing, then we went out to eat dinner."

When it came time for Queen to start work on *A Night At The Opera* in the summer of 1975 at Rockfield Studios in South Wales, the rest of the band thought *Bohemian Rhapsody* was, according to Brian May, an "intriguing and original and worthy of work" and Freddie himself felt that the time was right to get it out of his head and down on record.

"*Bohemian Rhapsody* was something that I'd wanted to do for a long while, actually," he explained in *Freddie Mercury: A Life, In His Own Words*. "It wasn't something I'd given much thought to on previous albums but I just felt that when it came to the fourth album I was going to do it."

The concept for a three-part mini-opera – that ballad beginning, opera-style middle section and hard rock finale – was a stroke of genre-defying genius, with Mercury continuing: "It was really three songs and I just put them together. I'd always wanted to do something operatic, something with a mood-setter at the start, going into a rock type of thing that completely breaks off into an opera section."

The man who 12 years later would belt out *Barcelona* alongside Montserrat Caballé, from the album of the same name that he recorded with the Spanish diva, was an opera novice at the time. "I wasn't saying I was an opera fanatic," Mercury confessed to the *NME*, "I just wanted it to be opera in the rock'n'roll sense. Although it was tongue-in-cheek and it was mock opera, I still wanted it to be very much a Queen thing."

He also wanted the operatic interlude to be outrageous enough to leave

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Freddie at the piano, on stage with Queen in 1975, the year *Bohemian Rhapsody* stormed the charts

reviewers baffled as to how to categorise it. "If you really listen to the operatic part there are no comparisons, which is what we wanted," Freddie told Radio 1. "Somebody said it was like Cecil B DeMille [the Hollywood filmmaker known for his epics] meets Walt Disney."

The rest of the band didn't take much convincing of the song's potential. Roger Taylor recalled on *Greatest Video Hits*: "Freddie said, 'I've got this thing' and I immediately thought the melody was beautiful. The verse 'Mama, just killed a man' – it's a very beautiful melody and so that in itself was enough to sell it to me."

Brian was busy with his own compositions for the album, like *39*, *Good Company* and *The Prophet's Song* and remembered in the same interview: "I was beavering away on *Prophet's Song* and the things that I was trying to write, and Freddie was beavering away working out his piano parts and everything. I remember hearing *Bohemian Rhapsody* at that time and thinking, 'Bloody hell, that's pretty unusual.'

"There were a lot of passages where something would happen and then there'd be silence and a count and then it would all start up again. So there were long gaps in the recording and we said, 'What goes on there Freddie?' and he said, 'Oh that's the operatic bit' and, 'That's this bit'..." Back on board as co-producer of *A Night At The Opera* with the band themselves, Roy Thomas Baker was the perfect partner in crime. While serving as an apprentice at Decca Records he'd worked on recordings of Gilbert & Sullivan's light operas by the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company, so he knew what Freddie was after. Collaborating with Queen was always furtive ground for Baker, who said in the Queen biography *Is This The Real Life?*: "Queen came up with so many ideas but my job was to organise those ideas in order to make them work. Ideas weren't problems. They were challenges. I'd never say, 'That's not possible.'"

In the mid-70s Queen were very much a band on the ascendance. "We'd had a big hit in many countries with *Killer Queen* and the *Sheer Heart Attack* album had been a big hit as well," Roger noted in the official *Bohemian Rhapsody* documentary, *Inside The Rhapsody*. "We were at a very good point in our career, very much on the rise and doing very well." Taylor and May wrote songs for all the albums. "But Freddie was probably the most prolific and Brian was close behind, and then I'd usually write one or two and that would be it."

May took up the thread: "What always happened when we went into recording an album was that we all brought in our ideas and kind of plonked them on the table." Taylor again: "And the others would go, 'Hmm, don't like it, like it, whatever, you know, let's work on it.'"

That's what happened with Freddie's "opera thing", although it didn't have a title at first. Then, as May relates: "I do remember a moment where Freddie came along and said, 'And I'm gonna call it *Bohemian Rhapsody.*' You never knew quite whether Freddie was joking or what. You never knew how serious it was but it turned out to be serious. Some of his ideas turned out to be not serious but that one stuck."

LATER, FREDDIE WOULD CONFESS: "I'M GOING TO SHATTER SOME ILLUSIONS NOW. *BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY* WAS JUST ONE OF THOSE PIECES I WROTE FOR THE ALBUM, JUST AS PART OF MY BATCH OF SONGS."

It almost didn't. Later, Freddie would confess (as quoted in *A Life, In His Own Words*): "I'm going to shatter some illusions now. *Bohemian Rhapsody* was just one of those pieces I wrote for the album, just as part of my batch of songs. In its early stages I almost rejected it, but then it grew."

Boy, did it grow! Freddie's folly, as detractors (of whom, to be fair, there were quite a few in the music press at the time) might have dubbed it, was a mini-epic on an album on which the singer admitted Queen "went a bit overboard".

He was unapologetic: "In certain areas we always feel that we want to go overboard, but if something is worth doing, it's worth overdoing!" In the case of *Bohemian Rhapsody*, those detractors might have been going, "WTF?" but Queen overdoing things with overdubs, mock-opera, raging guitars and a three-act structure is what helped catapult them to the top of the charts. "I'm just a poor boy" Freddie lamented in the lyrics, but he and his bandmates were now firmly on the road to unimaginable riches. ■

Peavey
Peavey

© Getty

BOHEMIAN MEMORIES

We'd already dealt with a lot of complexity, I suppose you would call it. If you look at *My Fairy King* on the first album, first of all, you would hear Freddie playing some bits and you'd say, 'Well, what's that?' He'd say, 'Well, this bit goes with this bit' and whatever. So we were used to sort of building things up in the studio and he came with a number of pieces of *Bohemian Rhapsody* and said, 'Yes, this all connects to this and this.' And it was interesting, but not vastly out of the norm, I would say. It was just something else nice and juicy to work with and work on.

BRIAN MAY (LIBRARY OF CONGRESS)

They were great to work with, although like most bands there was an element of internal bickering. I always told them that it was too embarrassing for them to have an argument in front of everyone in the studio. So I would always make a room available for them to go to and argue in private.

ROY THOMAS BAKER, PRODUCER (SOUND ON SOUND)

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We Will Rock You: Queen in 1975, at the height of their commercial power

© Getty

CAUGHT IN A LANDSLIDE

THE RECORDING, MUSIC AND LYRICS

BRINGING FREDDIE MERCURY'S DISPARATE DREAM TO FRUITION WAS A MONUMENTAL UNDERTAKING, BUT THANKS TO STUDIO KNOW-HOW, *BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY* WAS BROUGHT MAJESTICALLY TO LIFE…

Freddie's grand ambition for his three-part part-ballad, part-opera, part-rock song magnum opus meant that he, Brian, Roger, John and producer Roy Thomas Baker all had their work cut out for them. "It was quite a mammoth task, actually," Mercury admitted in the *A Life* book of *Bohemian Rhapsody*'s complex recording process, "as it was done in three definite sections and just pieced together. Each one required a lot of concentration."

Rehearsals for the *A Night At The Opera* album were held at the new Ridge Farm Studio in Surrey in mid-1975, ahead of recording sessions across various facilities including Rockfield. *Bohemian Rhapsody* was an epic undertaking that was begun at Rockfield, then completed and finessed at Roundhouse, Sarm, Scorpio Sound and Wessex Sound studios.

As Brian May remembered in a chat with the BBC, there was no demo for them to work from. "It was all in Freddie's head and on lots of little pieces of paper, which he used to make notes on. He had the framework in his head, then we set about embroidering it."

The ballad section was simple enough, with Mercury playing a Bechstein piano, which legend has it was the same one Paul McCartney played on *Hey, Jude*. Brian rated Freddie as an exceptional pianist. "He didn't actually rate himself very much but he had such a unique style that no one else could quite do it," he told *Inside The Rhapsody*. "He didn't have the huge chops of a concert pianist, but he would learn things in his own way and play them immaculately, with incredible attack."

THE BALLAD SECTION WAS SIMPLE ENOUGH, WITH MERCURY PLAYING A BECHSTEIN PIANO WHICH LEGEND HAS IT WAS THE SAME ONE PAUL MCCARTNEY PLAYED ON *HEY, JUDE*

Next came the opera bit, with its many "Galileo"s, "Bismillah"s and "We will not let you go"s – all of which were sung by Freddie, Brian and Roger. Of the complex harmonies, May says in the *Inside The Rhapsody* doc: "Our voices blended very well. As soon as there was three of us singing it sounded like quite a lot of people really. It's because we were lucky in that we had different kinds of voices, the three of us." Roger hit most of the high notes because he had the highest voice. And John Deacon? "John opted out. John was not a singer."

As Freddie put it (quoted in *Freddie Mercury: A Life*): "The opera section in the middle was the most taxing because we wanted to re-create a huge operatic harmonies section between just the three of us. That involves a lot of multi-tracking and things. I think between the three of us we created a 160- to 200-piece choir effect."

They did the "No, no, no!" bit, he reckoned, around 150 times. The trio worked 10 to 12 hours a day for

Bohemian Rhapsody topped the UK Singles Chart for nine weeks

Queen
Bohemian Rhapsody
Queen
Bohemian Rhapsody
b/w
I'm In Love With My Car
Produced by Roy Thomas Baker and Queen
EMI 2375
Delga

Bohemian Rhapsody **was recorded by Roy Thomas Baker between August and September 1975**

three weeks, using the then-maximum 24-track analogue tapes and overdubbing them so many times that Brian held one strip of tape up to the light and, because of how many times it had been used, was able to see straight through it.

Mercury confirmed that to the BBC, saying: "We did so many overdubs for that song – we just kept piling it on and on – that the tape went transparent because it just couldn't take any more. I think it snapped in two places as well. It took a lot of work. I had everything in my mind and I made Roger, Brian and John play passages where they were asking, 'What the hell is happening here?' It was things like just one chord, and then a long gap, and another chord and long gap, and they were saying 'This is ridiculous!' But I had it in my head what was going on around each segment."

After the opera section came Brian's incredible guitar riff but, talking to the BBC, the axeman credited Freddie with its conception. "The heavy bit was a great opportunity for us to be at full pelt as a rock band but that big, heavy riff came from Freddie, not me. He played it on the piano, which is quite difficult because he plays in octaves. I just worked off that and slightly adapted it to the way a guitar needs to play it."

Like the vocals, the track was overdubbed with Brian playing different guitars, saying in *Inside The Rhapsody*: "There's a lot of colours, quite deliberately. I used all different pickup settings and different amps even to get different sounds, almost like you were building up orchestral sounds using different instruments."

And the track's huge drum sound? "Precocious boys that we were, we forced everybody into recording the drums the way we wanted – which was in the middle of a big studio with mics everywhere and not too many mics close to the kit. Mainly it's an ambient drum sound. That's why it sounds so big."

May recalled fondly that Mercury was a compulsive doodler whose scribblings were "strangely chaotic" and thus offered no real insight into what the lyrics of *Bohemian Rhapsody* actually mean.

> FREDDIE TOLD THE *NME* IN 1977 THAT PEOPLE KEPT ASKING HIM WHAT THE SONG WAS ALL ABOUT: "AND I SAY 'I DON'T KNOW'. I THINK IT LOSES THE MYTH AND RUINS A KIND OF MYSTIQUE THAT PEOPLE HAVE BUILT UP."

But May himself has always refused to dissect those lyrics. "What is *Bohemian Rhapsody* about?" he pondered to CNN. "I don't think we will ever know. I mean, if I knew I probably wouldn't want to tell you anyway because I wouldn't tell you what my songs are about. I hate doing that. I think it sort of destroys them really, because the great thing about a great song is that you relate it to your own personal experience and you feel it in your own life."

There's been much speculation over the past five decades that *Bohemian Rhapsody* was actually Freddie's coming-out song. The "just killed a man" lyric, some say, is a metaphor for him killing off his heterosexual persona and embracing his gayness – which chimes with the fact that the song was released around the time he broke off his long-term relationship with Mary Austin and began to openly embrace his sexuality, although he and Austin remained great friends and he left the bulk of his estate to her in his will.

Brian has neither confirmed nor denied such speculation, as quoted on TikTok. "There would be many theories, I know, because Freddie was wrestling with a lot of things in his personal life and he may have just chosen to put them into the song in that way. He was certainly looking at rediscovering himself and I think at that time it was probably too scary a thing for him to do. He actually did it later. I think it's nice to leave the question mark in the air."

For his part, Freddie told the *NME* in 1977 that people kept asking him what *Bohemian Rhapsody* was all about: "And I say, 'I don't know'. I think it loses the myth and ruins a kind of mystique that people have built up. *Rhapsody* is one of those songs that has a fantasy feel about it. I think people should just listen to it, think about it and then decide for themselves."

If it was about his personal life, he wasn't saying. "I like people to make up their own minds. I think if I were to get into every word, it would be very boring for the listeners and it might also shatter a few illusions. I write complicated songs."

Sometimes too complicated for even their composer to fathom, apparently. As Mercury added: "*Bohemian Rhapsody* is a good one, but I still cannot understand it." ■

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BOHEMIAN MEMORIES

> We were told it was going to be a hard sell, but it ended up being easy because Kenny Everett stole the tape from a playback session we had to launch the *A Night At The Opera* album and took it upon himself to go out and play it to death. That made everybody else sit up. All the rest of the radio outlets thought, 'Oh God, we'd better get on this quick or else we'll be left behind!'

BRIAN MAY (BBC)

> All the elements were in Freddie's mind. He literally had them all lined up like soldiers in his mind. It really was all there, and all the harmonies he wrote out in little blocks on the back of a telephone directory. As we added the central sections, it became more and more outlandish and ridiculous. But I always liked the core of the song, and the core of the song is essentially the verses.

ROGER TAYLOR (INSIDE THE RHAPSODY DOCUMENTARY)

© Getty

Queen in 1975, the year they released the *A Night At The Opera* album

Queen
Bohemian Rhapsody

OPEN YOUR EYES

THE VIDEO

IT WAS ONE OF THE FIRST SONGS TO UTILISE THE PROMO VIDEO FORMAT AND DIRECTOR BRUCE GOWER HAD THE HERCULEAN TASK OF DOING JUSTICE TO A PRODUCTION OF EPIC PROPORTIONS

It's said to be the first music video, which isn't strictly true. The Beatles, Bowie and ABBA had all made promo videos before Queen put one together for *Bohemian Rhapsody* and in fact the band themselves had done the same for the likes of *Keep Yourself Alive, Seven Seas Of Rhye* and *Killer Queen*. But those were performance clips, captured on tape, to be shown on *Top Of The Pops* when artists couldn't be there themselves. With *Bohemian Rhapsody* Queen are credited with being the first band to come up with a concept video as a key part of the marketing strategy.

"IT WAS FILMED WITH THE EXPRESS PURPOSE OF GIVING IT TO *TOP OF THE POPS* [WHICH] DIDN'T HAVE A GOOD REPUTATION AMONG MUSICIANS" – BRIAN MAY

As Brian May put it in his BBC interview: "It was filmed with the express purpose of giving it to *Top Of The Pops* [which] didn't have a good reputation among musicians." Said musicians would have to mime their song on a small stage surrounded by a bunch of uncool kids or, God forbid, have the track set to a choreographed routine by all-female dance troupe Pan's People. The TV show, Brian believed, was "a bit of a travesty but you could hardly knock it because it was the way that records were sold".

Making a video, Roger Taylor added, was a simple device to allow them to be touring and to be on *Top Of The Pops* at the same time. So the band combined footage of them performing *Bohemian Rhapsody* with clips of them in a diamond formation, as a deliberate nod to the cover of their *Queen II* album, singing the a cappella opening and opera section. It was done on the cheap, at least by subsequent standards: between £3,500 and £4,500 total, including director Bruce Gowers' fee. And it was done quickly: four hours, with no storyboards and minimal rehearsal, so that the band could get to the pub before last orders.

Queen were busy prepping for their forthcoming tour at Elstree Studios, so they brought along an outside broadcast truck of the kind used for sport at the time. "The idea was to essentially shoot it as if it were live and it was on our rehearsal stage at Elstree," Roger recalled on *Inside The Rhapsody.* "We had a side stage and we just lit it ourselves with overhead white light directly down. The opening shots of the harmonies, the a cappella stuff, was done on the side stage and some of the tricky shots in the centre were also done like that. But the core of the song was done on a live stage with our stage lights. That was really to sell the idea that Queen was in essence a live band."

© Getty

At London's Les Ambassadeurs Club to receive an award for over one million copies sold of *Bohemian Rhapsody*

Gowers concurred in the *Sunday People* with: "Everything was set up for their tour so they performed as they would in front of an audience – and it looked like they were. There were no big egos, everyone was really easygoing."

The idea for the top lighting was Freddie's and it was in homage to Marlene Dietrich in black-and-white movies, which had also influenced the *Queen II* cover. The special effects were all down to clever trickery during filming rather than in post-production. For example, when Freddie's face stretches away as he sings "Magnifico" and "Let me go" the effect was achieved by turning the camera towards a video monitor, with Taylor noting in the official documentary: "It was such a simple thing to do. You just turn the camera into the monitor and it's like a visual feedback thing."

And the "honeycomb" visual of the band's heads? "That was a prism lens, a sort of multifaceted lens on the front of the camera – very, very simple stuff really, very basic." Hardly anyone did videos at the time. "You went to *Top Of The Pops* and then they might show it again, you know, if you were still there [on the charts] two weeks later. But nobody had videos and so that was what made it different. It was made expressly as a marketing tool, a promotional tool for the single on video."

If the video was a bit of rush job, it was also a revolutionary one, even if Brian played down its seismic impact when he told the Beeb: "I know it's been called the first ever music video, but it's hard to actually define these things. I know for a fact The Beatles made 35mm films of tracks, but ours was more like a mini-movie."

The mini-movie served the busy band well during *Bohemian Rhapsody's* nine-week stint at the top of the UK pop charts. With *Top Of The Pops*, May told the Library of Congress: "If the record was No.1, their policy was they had to play it every time, so it turned out to be very useful and, of course, it was a boost for the record, which was already very hot. It snowballed in the UK and then the video enabled the record to snowball all around the world."

> THE IDEA FOR THE TOP LIGHTING WAS FREDDIE'S AND IT WAS IN HOMAGE TO MARLENE DIETRICH IN BLACK-AND-WHITE MOVIES, WHICH HAD ALSO INFLUENCED THE *QUEEN II* COVER

It was, for instance, massive in Australia. "I know they had a similar system where the video was played on TV and the record was massive and it was a game-changer all around the world at that time," he added.

In the book *His Life In His Own Words*, Mercury would note with hindsight: "*Bohemian Rhapsody* was one of the first videos to get the kind of attention that videos get now. We decided we should put *Rhapsody* on film and let people see it. We didn't know how it was going to be looked upon or how they were going to receive it. To us it was just another form of theatre."

As a marketing tool it was priceless, with Freddie adding: "In the early days you would make an album, then you did a tour straight afterwards, but sometimes it was four or five months before you got to a particular country. We recognised that a video could get to a lot of people in a lot of countries without you actually being there, and you could release a record and a video simultaneously."

Queen were on tour when the *Bohemian Rhapsody* video was first shown on *Top Of The Pops* in November 1975. "There was much hilarity," Brian remembered of them all crowding around a TV in a hotel room to watch the clip which they, like the fans, were seeing for the first time.

Making it, director Gowers told the *Sunday People*, had been "the greatest risk of Queen's career". He also admitted that if they'd had more money and more time, they "would have made something that was a lot better than what it was". Still, without the video the song might not have been such a phenomenal success, and the clip is credited with paving the way for MTV six years later – on which, fittingly, Queen became a mainstay throughout the 80s. ■

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Some stills from the now-iconic *Bohemian Rhapsody* promo video, filmed by Bruce Gowers

BOHEMIAN MEMORIES

“It was a very strange song to record, in a way, because we actually did it in sections. It was Freddie’s idea. I remember being in one recording session in Rockfield, where Freddie was saying, ‘Right, these are the notes’ and they seemed to have no connection with anything. He had all the ideas of what he wanted to go on top.”

JOHN DEACON (MAGIC YEARS)

“*Bohemian Rhapsody* was totally insane but we enjoyed every minute of it. It was basically a joke, but a successful joke. We had to record it in three separate units. We did the whole beginning bit, then the whole middle bit and then the whole end. It was complete madness. The middle part started off being just a couple of seconds, but Freddie kept coming in with more ‘Galileo’s and we kept on adding to the opera section, and it just got bigger and bigger. We never stopped laughing.”

ROY THOMAS BAKER (MIX MAGAZINE)

© Getty

SENDS SHIVERS DOWN MY SPINE

THE RELEASE AND REACTION

EVERYONE THOUGHT THEY'D COMPLETELY LOST THE PLOT, BUT WHEN *BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY* EVENTUALLY DROPPED IN OCTOBER 1975, IT WAS A RISK THAT PAID OFF – QUEEN WERE FINALLY AT UK NO.1

© Getty

By 1975 Elton John and Queen shared a manager in John Reid, who'd been brought in to sort out their financial affairs at a time when, because of their deal with Trident, they weren't earning as much as they should have been. Their excesses at the time were limited to insisting on putting out a single that ran for nearly six minutes and when Reid played *Bohemian Rhapsody* for Elton his reaction was a vociferous: "Are you fucking mad!?"

As he wrote in his autobiography *Me*, Elton asked Reid: "You're not actually going to release that, are you?" When the the manager pressed the singer for the reasons for his doubts, Elton told him: "For one thing, it's about three hours long. For another, it's the campest thing I've ever heard in my life. And the title's absolutely ridiculous as well." The band's old tour buddy Ian Hunter from

Freddie in typically flamboyant mode on stage in Tokyo, April 1975 ▸

Mott The Hoople was equally perplexed. He dropped into the studio during the *A Night At The Opera* recording sessions to see if Queen would be interested in playing on his new solo album.

Freddie and co gave him a sneak preview of *Bohemian Rhapsody*. "They unleashed it on four huge speakers," Hunter is quoted as saying in *Is This The Real Life?* "I couldn't make head nor tail of all that pomp and circumstance. It was like being run over by a truck."

Despite Elton and Ian's less-than-enthusiastic reactions, Queen opted to release *Bohemian Rhapsody* as the album's lead single anyway. "We just thought that it was a very strong track and so we released it," Mercury said in *A Life, In His Own Words*. "We made the right decision, but that is not to say that we're always right, because we're not. It could have gone completely the other way. I'd say something like *Rhapsody* was a big risk and it worked."

Discussions about which song to put out first began around halfway through the album sessions. Brian May's *The Prophet's Song* was an early frontrunner and, at eight minutes and 21 seconds, it was even longer than *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Eventually it was decided that the latter was the better choice, although record company execs both in the UK and the US worried it was way too long for radio play.

"It had a very big risk factor and there were so many arguments about it," Freddie said on Australian TV show *Countdown*. "The radio people didn't like it initially because it was too long and the record companies said, 'You can't market it that way.'" Since it was basically three songs spliced together, the label suggested Mercury slice it up somehow. "And I said 'No way'. They said nobody would play it, 'It's too long', and I just said, 'Either it goes out in its entirety or not at all'. The six-minute length could have meant that radio stations would have refused to play it. People were saying, 'You're mad! They'll never play it. You'll only hear the first few bars and then they'll fade it out.'"

The band had been forced to make compromises before but "cutting up a song would never be one of them". May did, however, reveal in the *Bohemian Rhapsody* documentary that there was an attempt to edit it down. "Somebody did cut it down. I think John actually did an edit, so it goes from 'Mama, just killed a man', the ballad side, to the end – you know, the last bit of the ballad. You've got no operatic [section], you've got no heavy bit."

What changed their minds? "If you were gonna go for it, you had to go for it. And we persuaded everybody else. Actually probably Freddie persuaded everybody else because you couldn't argue with Freddie once he got on a roll, but we just totally backed him up and said, 'Look, this has to go out in its entirety.'"

General manager of EMI's international division Paul Watts summed up the label's response when he said: "I was expecting something very special, so when they played me *Bohemian Rhapsody* my reaction was, 'What the fuck's this? Are you mad?'" (*Is This the Real Life?*)

Roy Thomas Baker reminded EMI that Richard Harris had had a hit in 1968 with *MacArthur Park*, which ran for seven minutes and 21 seconds, but they worried that the BBC wouldn't play a song that long when the current formula was three-and-a-half minutes.

Queen were a hot-headed band who Freddie reckoned "argued about everything, even the air that we breathe" but they were united in their fight with EMI. The label kept insisting that radio DJs would refuse to play such an epic song. To prove them wrong they went directly to DJ and friend Kenny Everett, giving him a reel-to-reel tape of *Bohemian Rhapsody*. At first Everett only played snippets of the song on his Capital Radio show, then ended up broadcasting the full track 14 times over the weekend – leading to fans rushing out to record stores on the Monday to buy it, only to be told it hadn't yet been released. A similar thing happened in the States, where DJ Paul Drew tracked down a copy of the song after hearing it on Kenny's show. As producer Roy Thomas Baker marvelled to *Sound On Sound*: "It was a strange situation where radio on both sides of the Atlantic was breaking a record that the record companies said would never get airplay."

The song finally came out over here on 31 October 1975, much to the bemusement of many in the UK music press. The *NME* felt the band sounded "extremely self-important" and *Record Mirror* lamented "among its many parts there's scarcely a shred of a tune". In a positive review *Sounds* hailed it as "a dazzlingly clever epic from the fevered mind of Freddie Mercury" and although *Melody Maker* damned the song with faint praise as "horrifically fascinating" their reviewer presciently predicted: "It's likely to be a hit of enormous proportions despite its length."

Indeed it was. After racking up sales of more than 100,000 copies in its first week of release, *Bohemian Rhapsody* topped the UK Singles Chart for nine weeks and was the 1975 Christmas No.1. Released in December in the US, it went to No.9 over there and topped the charts in Australia, Belgium, Canada and Ireland.

That was doubly good news for Roger Taylor, whose song *I'm In Love With My Car* was on the B-side and thus earned him huge royalties. "It was a real sticking point for the band and it's good we got through it," May told *Guitar Player* many years later. "How long did it take me to get over it? Oh, quite a while."

During the same interview, Taylor grinned: "He's never forgiven me and I've never stopped laughing about it!" ■

"YOU'RE NOT ACTUALLY GOING TO RELEASE THAT, ARE YOU?"
– ELTON JOHN

© Getty

BOHEMIAN MEMORIES

“I think we did feel it was pretty special, yes. We knew it was unique. I think it’s safe to say we were very excited. We were excited about the whole record, though, the whole album. We never considered ourselves a ‘singles band’. We didn’t go into this to make singles pretty much ever; I don’t think we ever did that. We always went in with the idea of making an album [and] that’s kind of ‘old school’ thinking, but that’s the way we were – we wanted to present a piece of work which represented us at that particular time. There’s that feeling that an album defines you at any particular moment and so you paint it with all the colours you can to make it a complete work.”

BRIAN MAY (LIBRARY OF CONGRESS)

“We started deciding on a single about halfway through. There were a few contenders – we were thinking of *The Prophet’s Song* at one point – but then *Bohemian Rhapsody* seemed the one. There was a time when the others wanted to chop it around a bit, but I refused. If it was going to be released, it would be in its entirety.”

FREDDIE MERCURY (SOUNDS)

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A NIGHT AT THE OPERA

IT WAS QUEEN'S THIRD STUDIO ALBUM AND THEIR FIRST UK CHART-TOPPER. WE REMEMBER THE LONG-PLAYER THAT GAVE THE WORLD ONE OF THE GREATEST SONGS OF ALL TIME…

New manager John Reid was Queen's knight in shining armour when it came time for them to make their fourth album *A Night At The Opera*. Despite the success of preceding album *Sheer Heart Attack*, because of a complex contract with Trident they were earning just £60 a week each – with Brian May holed up in a bedsit and Freddie Mercury stuck in a damp flat. Roger Taylor and John Deacon were no better off, so they joined forces and lawyered-up to wiggle their way out of the dire management deal.

Nine months later they signed with Reid. "And he really did a rescue job on us because we were in debt and in a terrible situation with our former management," May told an interviewer for the Library of Congress. John's message to the band was: "OK, you make the best album you've ever made and I will sort out all the business."

Working again with producer Roy Thomas Baker (who was also a Trident escapee), *A Night At The Opera* ended up being a no-expense-spared enterprise – costing an estimated £40,000, thus making it the most costly album ever made at the time.

Freddie admitted to *Sounds* of making records: "It's the most strenuous part of my career. It's so exhausting, mentally and physically. It drains you dry." He wondered why he kept coming back for more, especially after the arduous recording process for *Sheer Heart Attack*. When that album was done, he recalled in *Sounds*: "We were insane and said never again." But the creative itch was simply too strong. "We were writing like crazy. There was so much hunger. We had so much that we wanted to bring out. Yes, we went a bit overboard on that album and on most albums, actually… but if something is worth doing, it's worth overdoing!"

***A Night At The Opera* became Queen's first No.1 LP, topping the UK Albums Chart for four non-consecutive weeks**

DESPITE THE SUCCESS OF *SHEER HEART ATTACK*, BECAUSE OF A COMPLEX CONTRACT WITH TRIDENT THEY WERE EARNING JUST £60 A WEEK – WITH BRIAN HOLED UP IN A BEDSIT AND FREDDIE STUCK IN A DAMP FLAT

And overdid it they did, working at various different studios (Rockfield in Monmouthshire, plus other locations around London) across four months from August to November 1975 – prior to which they'd written and rehearsed new material for nearly two months. The only old track they repurposed for the album was a guitar-led cover of the national anthem *God Save The Queen*, which had been recorded the previous year.

Brian May said of the album to *Rolling Stone*: "This is our canvas, we will paint on it at our leisure." He was, engineer Gary Langan recalled in *Is This The Real Life?*, a perfectionist. "People talk about Michael Jackson spending two weeks on getting a drum track, but I can tell tales of Brian May spending a week on a guitar solo."

Of the band's dynamic in the studio, the engineer added: "For me, any band is made up of different chemical elements. In Queen there was Roger Taylor, who was very much this wild child, and at the other end there was Mister Methodical Brian May." Freddie was there in full costume and John Deacon had his head down, getting on with the job as he always did.

Rather than the usual 16-track tape, they could now afford 24-track tape –

Good Company: Queen rock out at Hammersmith Odeon in London, 1975

which came in very handy for the multitracked vocals on the likes of *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *The Prophet's Song*. Freddie wrote the former, along with four other tracks including the ballad *Love Of My Life* and album opener *Death On Two Legs*. The latter was Mercury's savage attack on their former manager and Trident Studios owner Norman Sheffield, and although he wasn't mentioned by name in the lyrics Sheffield sued the band for defamation and received an out-of-court settlement.

May wrote *The Prophet's Song* plus three other tracks. Roger Taylor contributed *Bohemian Rhapsody* B-side *I'm In Love With My Car* and John Deacon delivered second single *You're My Best Friend*, with Mercury teasing the press with: "It's easily our most important album yet to be honest. I know that we've got the strongest set of songs ever." May, meanwhile, promised to *Melody Maker*: "It's music to tear your emotions apart." The band incorporated various instruments, including grand piano, timpani, harp, double bass and Japanese koto. What didn't they bring into the mix? "No Synthesisers!" they declared on the LP's sleeve, the front of which featured the band's Mercury-designed logo. The title *A Night At The Opera* came from the Marx Brothers film of the same name (which Freddie and co had viewed during the album's recording), gaining them a friend in Groucho Marx in the process.

THE TITLE *A NIGHT AT THE OPERA* CAME FROM THE MARX BROTHERS FILM OF THE SAME NAME, GAINING THEM A FRIEND AND A FAN IN GROUCHO MARX IN THE PROCESS

The first playback for John Reid wasn't exactly a glamorous affair. For some reason he had to drive up to Liverpool in his Rolls-Royce to listen to *A Night At The Opera* while sat on the floor of an unfinished studio. EMI's head of press and promotions Martin Nelson recalled in *Is This The Real Life?*: "The tape machine was working but only in mono, so it was just coming out on one speaker. Not the best way to hear your new album back for the first time. John was incensed." Fortunately the studio was in a rough part of the city. "Someone had stolen John's hubcaps, so he became distracted by that."

EMI released the album in the UK on 21 November, the day after the band first played *Bohemian Rhapsody* on *Top Of The Pops* and a month before Queen were scheduled to start their A Night At The Opera tour.

The reviews were mostly raves, with the *NME* proclaiming: "If it's the most expensive album ever made in a British studio, it's also arguably the best." *Melody Maker* felt it was Queen's finest work to date, while in the States reactions were more mixed. *Rolling Stone* felt the songs were good, not great, and *The Village Voice* was still waiting for the band to deliver "a coherent masterwork". It was left to the *Winnipeg Free Press*, of all publications, to loudly sing Queen's praises with: "The group's potential is practically limitless."

The album about which May would later say to the BBC, "we wanted *A Night At The Opera* to be our *Sgt. Pepper*", went to No.1 in the UK, Australia and the Netherlands and reached No.4 in the US – where *Bohemian Rhapsody* was nominated for, but didn't win, two Grammy Awards.

On home turf, Mercury bagged the Ivor Novello Award for writing the song, then EMI presented the band with gold discs for the album's stellar sales. A sceptical Freddie, believing the label to be cheapskates, broke open the frame, put the record on the player and was surprised to find that it was indeed the album that had sealed Queen's fate as one of the biggest rock bands on the planet. As *Uncut* magazine would note after the album's 2011 remastered reissue: "Gorging on grandiose gestures galore, *A Night At The Opera* secured itself instant classic status."

© Getty

BOHEMIAN MEMORIES

> The record company, in their infinite ignorance, immediately suggested that we cut it down and so did our manager at the time. [But] you have to take risks at certain points and that was a point at which we decided to take a risk. It was, 'That's as it is, that's what it is, we think it's quite unique.' It really was hit or miss. It was either gonna be massive or it was gonna be nothing, you know, ignored.

ROGER TAYLOR (INSIDE THE RHAPSODY DOCUMENTARY)

> It's one of those songs which has such a fantasy feel about it. I think people should just listen to it, think about it, and then make up their own minds as to what it says to them. *Bohemian Rhapsody* didn't just come out of thin air. I did a bit of research, although it was tongue-in-cheek and mock opera [and] why not?

FREDDIE MERCURY (A LIFE, IN HIS OWN WORDS)

© Getty

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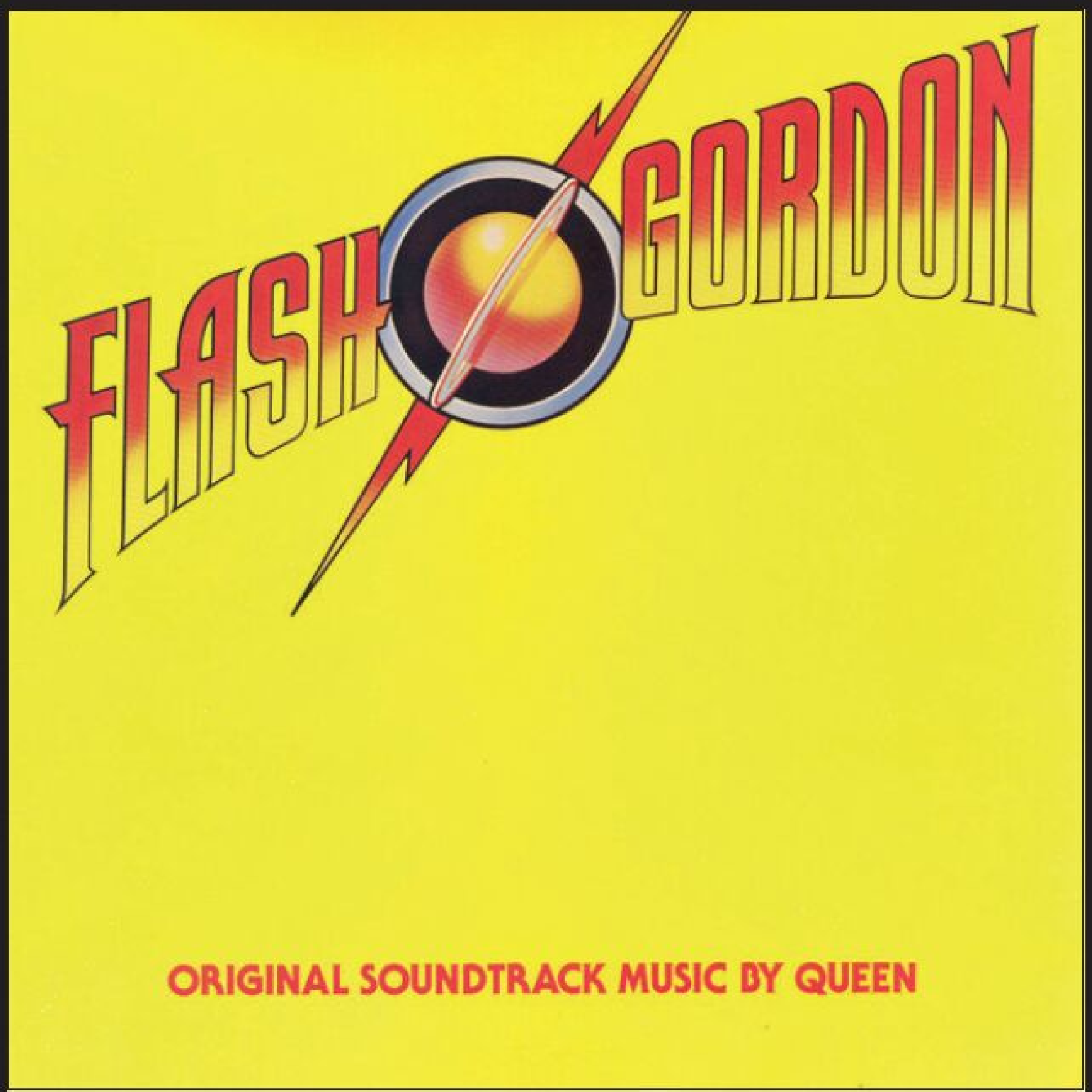
WHAT QUEEN DID NEXT

AFTER THEIR RAPTUROUS NO.1, QUEEN EMBARKED ON A GLORIOUS PERIOD THAT TOOK IN HIT ALBUMS, LIVE AID AND *WAYNE'S WORLD*…

Flying high after the release of *Bohemian Rhapsody*, Freddie said of the song in *A Life, In His Own Words:* "It certainly paved the way for us and brought us to a much wider cross-section of the market. We've always put our necks on the line. We did it with *Queen II* in 1974. On that album we did so many outrageous things that people wrote 'Self-indulgent crap, too many vocals, too much everything'. But that is Queen [and] after *Bohemian Rhapsody* they seemed to realise that that was what Queen were all about."

As the second single from *A Night At The Opera*, the John Deacon-penned *You're My Best Friend* was a smaller hit (reaching No.7 over here) but it was a hit nonetheless. *Somebody To Love* from the 1976 follow-up album *A Day At The Races* bettered it with a No.2 UK placing and the album itself was another homeland chart-topper.

More big-selling albums followed with *News Of The World*, *Jazz*, *The Game*, the *Flash Gordon* soundtrack, *Hot Space* and *The Works*. And while most bands, if they're lucky, get one or two signature songs, Queen added several more to their roster of hit singles and tour favourites with the likes of *We Are The Champions*, *Crazy Little Thing Called Love*, *Another One Bites The Dust*, *Under Pressure*, *Radio Ga Ga* and *I Want To Break Free*. Several of those songs made it, either in full or as truncated versions, into their setlist for Live Aid at Wembley Stadium on 13 July 1985. Their 21-minute set became the stuff of legend as Freddie held the 72,000-strong crowd in the palm of his hand, with Brian May marvelling to *Classic Rock* later: "It was an amazing moment and pretty much unexpected, because we were the last band to be booked on the bill and it was all sold-out before we were even announced."


FLASH GORDON
ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK MUSIC BY QUEEN

1980's *Flash Gordon* is one of two film soundtracks that Queen produced, along with 1986's *Highlander*

Unlike many other acts on the bill at both Wembley and Philadelphia's John F. Kennedy Stadium, Queen's segment was meticulously rehearsed, although May admitted to *Louder*: "We went on not expecting much, feeling a bit like the outsiders, so to see that response was mind-blowing." It was also a shot in the arm for a band who, despite continued success, had become tired of the grind. As Roger Taylor put it to Japan's NHK news agency: "Live Aid got us out of a period when we were bored and a little jaded, and I think it picked us up and reminded us that we were a good band and there was a lot of love for us out there in the public. It gave us huge renewed confidence."

As it was bound to, what with the entire crowd doing the *Radio Ga Ga* handclap and joining in with Freddie's "Ay-Oh!" call and response. Sales of Queen records also soared after Live Aid, although the band remained out of favour in much of North America after puritanical folk over there had taken offence to the previous year's video for *I Want To Break Free*.

The clip saw the band dressed up in drag for a pastiche of *Coronation Street* and May recalled to radio host Terry Gross: "We had a fantastic laugh doing it. It was hilarious to do it and all around the world people laughed and they got the joke and they sort of understood it. But I remember being on the promo tour in the Midwest of America and people's faces turning ashen."

America's loss was the rest of the world's gain as post-Live Aid Queen toured the world and notched up more massive

Freddie in his iconic Live Aid vest. It's generally regarded that Queen stole the show that day in 1985.

© Getty

Freddie with opera singer Montserrat Caballé

hits with the likes of *One Vision*, *A Kind Of Magic*, *I Want It All* and *Innuendo*. It wasn't until the early 90s re-release of *Bohemian Rhapsody* that they made it back into the upper echelons of the US charts, and this brief return proved to be a one-off.

As noted elsewhere, the inclusion of *Bohemian Rhapsody* in the film *Wayne's World* also helped remind the country of Queen's brilliance, with Brian saying to the BBC: "There's a layer of humour in Queen songs and Mike Myers managed to find it in *Bohemian Rhapsody*. It made it into a different kind of classic, and propelled it to a second life in the States. There's a huge irony there, because there was a time when we completely owned America and we would tour there every year. Freddie had a very dark sense of humour and he used to say, 'I suppose I'll have to die before we get America back' and in a sense that was what happened."

THE BAND'S RISE TO FAME, THE MAKING OF THEIR MASTERPIECE AND THEIR PERSONAL STORIES WERE RETOLD IN THE BIOPIC *BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY*, BY WHICH POINT JOHN HAD RETIRED FROM THE LIMELIGHT

Before his passing in November 1991, Mercury enjoyed solo successes with the singles *I Was Born To Love You* and *The Great Pretender*, duetted with Montserrat Caballé on both the *Barcelona* single and album and had a bash at ballet dancing. A remix of *Living On My Own* from Freddie's 1985 album *Mr Bad Guy* gave him a posthumous No.1 two years after his death.

The Show Must Go On was the final Queen single released in Freddie's lifetime. A reissue of *Bohemian Rhapsody* backed with *These Are The Days Of Our Lives* two months after he died took the anthem back to No.1. Then in April 1992 performers including Elton John, David Bowie, Annie Lennox, Guns N' Roses and, of course, Mercury's surviving bandmates staged a tribute concert at Wembley Stadium – seven years after they'd taken it by storm at Live Aid.

The band's rise to fame, the making of their masterpiece and their personal stories were retold in the *Bohemian Rhapsody* biopic, by which point John Deacon had retired from the limelight. Some changes were made for dramatic purposes, with Roger telling NHK: "The time is slightly played with, but we wanted people to be touched and maybe to be uplifted a little."

Brian and Roger continue to keep Queen's legacy alive on live tours, most recently with Adam Lambert as lead vocalist. They're devoted to that legacy, with Brian telling *Mojo*: "We still get angry if things aren't right and it's still fun. When I pop off from this planet I would like to know that I've done my best on anything that I ever touched."

And upon hearing that *Crazy Little Thing...* had racked up a billion streams on Spotify, Roger was over the moon. "Every time I hear something like that I'm still delighted," he said in the same article. "If people are still listening that much, we must in some miraculous way still be relevant." ■

QUEEN
CRAZY LITTLE THING CALLED LOVE

Queen's 1979 single *Crazy Little Thing Called Love* is a member of Spotify's 'billion streams' club

© Getty

BOHEMIAN MEMORIES

“We knew it was very risky, but we had so much confidence in that song. I did anyway. I felt, underneath it all, that if it was successful it would earn a lot of respect. People were all going, ‘You’re joking, they’ll never play it, you’ll only hear the first few bars and then they’ll fade it out.’ We had numerous rows. EMI were shocked. ‘A six-minute single? You must be joking!’”

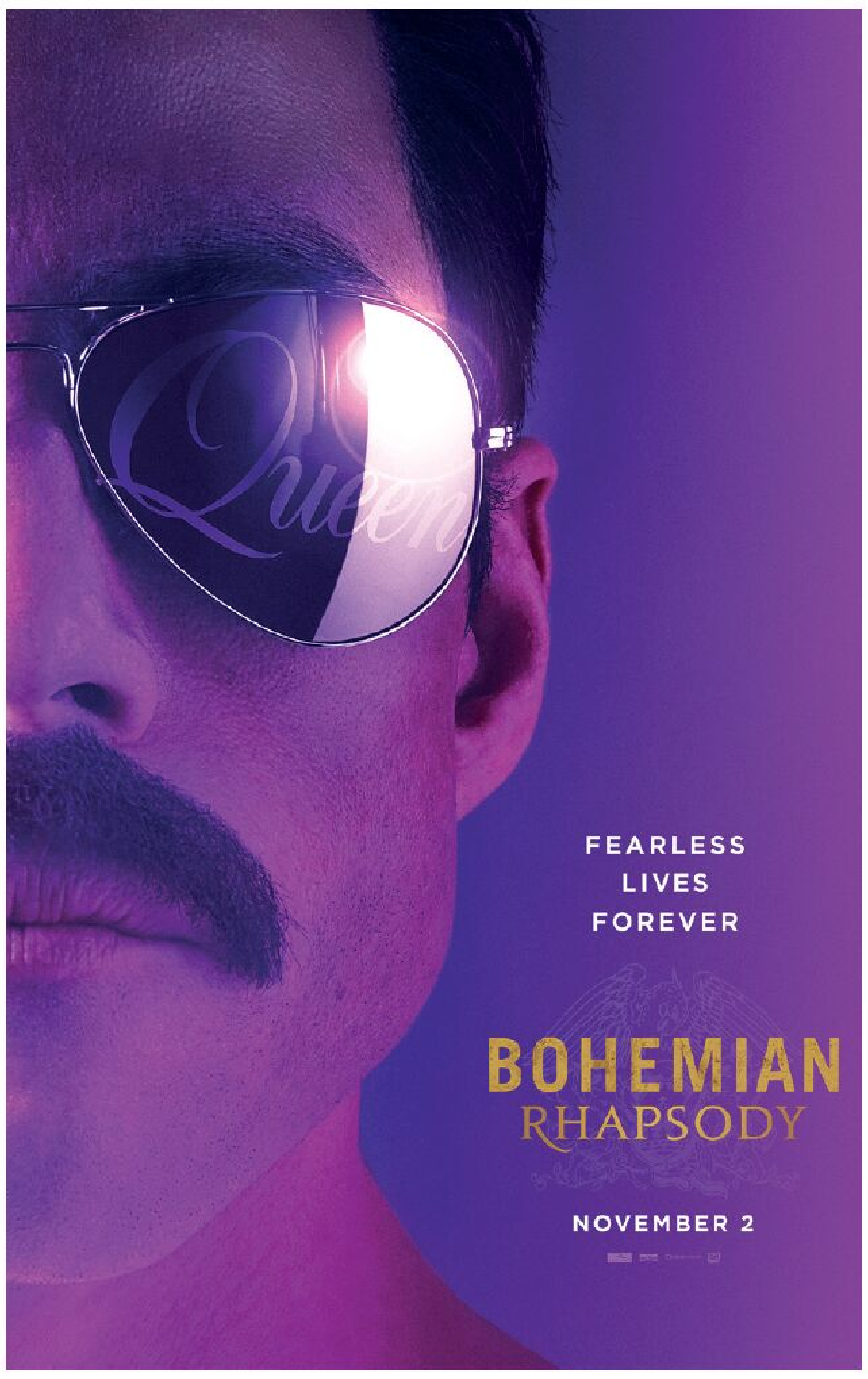
FREDDIE MERCURY (SOUNDS)

“When we finished the *A Night At The Opera* album, that was a track on it that we thought we were gonna release as a single in England first. When we released it in England we did have thoughts about perhaps editing it down but we listened to it over and over again and there was no way, you know, we could edit it. We tried a few ideas but if you edited it you always lost some part of the song, so we had to leave it all in and thankfully it took off anyway.”

JOHN DEACON (BROADCAST INTERVIEW WITH JIM LADD)

© Getty

Rami Malek in his Oscar-winning turn as Freddie Mercury in 2018's *Bohemian Rhapsody* biopic



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The *Bohemian Rhapsody* film was directed by *X-Men*'s Bryan Singer and *Rocket Man*'s Dexter Fletcher

BOHEMIAN LEGACY

QUEEN'S THREE-PART MINI OPERA IS UNLIKE ANYTHING THAT CAME BEFORE AND ITS LEGACY IS UNIQUE. WE EXPLORE THE EXPANSIVE REACH OF THE BAND'S BEST-SELLING BENCHMARK SINGLE.

Asked what he believes is the best Queen song ever, Brian May mused in the *Inside The Rhapsody* documentary: "I think it depends from what point of view [you're coming from]. I mean, *Bohemian Rhapsody* is certainly a damn good one." Five decades on from its release, it also remains the band's biggest seller and the UK's third best-selling single of all time (just behind Elton John's *Something About The Way You Look Tonight/Candle In The Wind 1997* and Band Aid's *Do They Know It's Christmas?*).

Taking into account its five-week return the top of the charts in 1991, when it was backed with *These Are The Days Of Our Lives* and re-released as a tribute to Freddie after his untimely passing, it has sold more than 2.6 million copies in the band's homeland and more than six million worldwide. After the 2018 *Bohemian Rhapsody* biopic hit cinemas, the song became the most streamed of all the songs originally released in the 20th century.

MAY REMAINS FOND OF THE SONG: "IT ENCAPSULATES A LOT OF WHAT WE ARE, WHAT WE HAVE BEEN AND WHAT OUR DREAM WAS. WE ENTERED INTO SO MANY AREAS BELIEVING WE COULD INNOVATE."

Rolling Stone reckons it's the 17th greatest song of all time (on their 2021 list), with the magazine's readers rating Freddie's vocals as the best in rock history. In 2004 it was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame and in 2022 it was inducted into the Library of Congress's National Recording Registry for its cultural, historical or aesthetic significance. Like many major songs it has its own Wikipedia page but it also has its own nickname in *Bo Rap*.

May remains fond of it, telling *Far Out* magazine: "It encapsulates a lot of what we are, what we have been and what our dream was. We entered into so many areas believing we could innovate. We had a vision in our heads and a collective dream in the very early days because

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Mike Myers (Wayne) and Dana Carvey (Garth) in *Wayne World* – the film's headbanging scene helped bring *Bohemian Rhapsody* back to the fore

WAYNE'S WORLD

we were in an atmosphere of change, innovation and new freedoms."

Never one for false modesty, Freddie less-humbly declared (as quoted in *Mercury: An Intimate Biography Of Freddie Mercury*): "A lot of people slammed *Bohemian Rhapsody*, but who can you compare it to? Name one group who have done an operatic single. I can't think of anybody. But we didn't do an operatic single because we thought we'd be the only group to do it, it just happened. *Rhapsody* was of an era, it was of its time."

During its time it was praised in *Sounds* by the Beach Boys singer Brian Wilson as "the most competitive thing that's come along in ages" and by Greg Lake, whose song *I Believe In Father Christmas* it kept off the top spot, as "one of the greatest records ever made" (*Uncut*). Music historians have called it "either a prog-rock benchmark or the most convoluted novelty song ever recorded" (*Rolling Stone*) and "one of the most innovative pieces of the progressive rock era" (*The Economist*), comparable to Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd and The Who.

THE SONG'S POPULARITY IN THE US WAS REIGNITED BY *WAYNE'S WORLD*, IN WHICH HEAVY METAL FAN WAYNE AND HIS MATE GARTH WERE SEEN IN THEIR CAR HEADBANGING ALONG TO THE HARD ROCK SECTION

Only Procol Harum's *A Whiter Shade Of Pale* has reportedly had more plays on British radio and pub jukeboxes (based on a 2009 survey by PRS For Music). Readers of *The Observer* voted *Bohemian Rhapsody* the second best No.1 single ever, just behind John Lennon's *Imagine*, and it beat Lennon's song in a Guinness World Records poll. It also trounced the likes of Michael Jackson's *Billie Jean* and Adele's *Someone Like You* in an ITV poll for the nation's favourite chart-topper. Meanwhile its groundbreaking video has been viewed more than a billion times on YouTube.

There have been countless cover versions of the song, including spoofs by Bad News (aka the made-up rock band from TV series *The Comic Strip Presents*..., produced by Brian May himself) and "Weird Al" Yankovic. More reverent versions have been done by everyone from The Flaming Lips and Panic! At The Disco to, believe it or not, Elaine Paige and William Shatner. Then there's The Muppets, whose 2009 take on the song peaked at UK No.32.

The song's popularity in the US was reignited by the 1992 comedy film *Wayne's World*, in which heavy metal fan Wayne (Mike Myers) and his mate Garth (Dana Carvey) were seen in their car headbanging along to the hard rock section. To promote the film and its soundtrack a video was put out mixing footage from the original with clips from the movie – much to Myers' dismay, who lamented: "They've just whizzed on a Picasso." He sent an apology to the band via the record company and was relieved when they replied with: "Thank you for using our song." This astonished Myers, who responded with: "Thank you for even letting me touch the hem of your garments!"

When the new clip won the MTV Video Music Award for Best Video from a Film,

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Brian May and Roger Taylor even took to the stage to accept it, with an emotional Brian saying: "Freddie would be tickled." Turns out they'd shown the ailing Mercury a video cassette of the movie when Myers had sent it over for their approval. "He was confined to his bed, but I took it round and played it to him and he loved it," Brian told the BBC. "Strangely enough, the humour in it was quite close to our own because we did that kind of thing in the car!"

Years later Myers popped up in the *Bohemian Rhapsody* movie as a record company exec who says the song is way too long for radio airplay and not something that "teenagers can crank up the volume in their car and bang their heads to".

Having the song in *Wayne's World* boosted Queen's popularity in a country that had largely shunned them after the cross-dressing comedy of the *I Want To Break Free* video. "We were having hits all around the world, but not in the States," May told the Library of Congress. "Mike really had a big hand in changing that. And we loved it. It was done so respectfully and with such grace and humour."

Asked, as Brian had been, to name his favourite Queen song Roger was reticent, saying: "I have lots." How about *Bohemian Rhapsody*? "I love it, I think it's a great song [but] I don't know about favourite" he told *NHK*. But neither he nor May are fed up of being asked about it 50 years on. "You can't complain that people want to talk about it all these years later," Brian told the BBC. "I still enjoy hearing it [and] if it comes on the radio I'll turn it up and listen." ■

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QUEEN

BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL

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Killer Queen: Freddie Mercury takes the stage in 1974

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BRITISH HIT SINGLES
'BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY'
QUEEN

8 MAY 2002

BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY VOTED FAVOURITE ALL-TIME HIT SINGLE

In May 2002, *Bohemian Rhapsody* was voted the UK's favourite single of all time, beating both The Beatles' *Hey Jude* and John Lennon's *Imagine* in a poll of 31,000 people organised by the *Guinness World Records British Hit Singles* book. Brian May and Roger Taylor proudly accepted the award at the Dominion Theatre in London where their *We Will Rock You* musical was due to be staged. "It has become a classic phenomenon and one which no one will ever allow us to forget," said May at the presentation. "The song was apparently so far ahead of any rival that even months before the deadline, its position in this new poll was unimpeachable. Thank you, people, for the memory."

Bohemian Rhapsody was the first single to top the UK charts twice with the same version and bagged the coveted Christmas No.1 two times, in 1975 and 1991. Other accolades for the single include the Britannia Award (later the Brit Award) for Best British Single of the past 25 years at the inaugural ceremony in 1977, a Grammy Hall Of Fame induction in 2004 and RIAA Diamond Certification, given in 2021. What's more, in 2007 *Bohemian Rhapsody* also became the most-played song since the launch of Radio 1, was the most-streamed track of the entire 20th century (awarded in 2018), plus the Library Of Congress added the single to the National Recording Registry in 2022. ■

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The great Freddie Mercury
(5 September 1946 –
24 November 1991)

Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody* is the third best-selling single of all time in the UK

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